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## ABSTRACT

This document defines learning as a process of knowledge and skills acquisition, application, reinforcement, and refinement that cannot be rushed. Each student brings to assigned tasks a personal perspective compiled of native abilities, acquired skills, personal interests, prior experiences, the home environment, exposure to diverse learning encounters, culture, attitudes, beliefs, values, and a track record of success related to the formal education process. Although learning is not a constant activity for an individual, there are a few critically important times during a class period or a typical school day when individuals tend to focus. These optimum learning moments are different for different individuals. Because of this, social studies teachers must identify activities and experiences that will interest and motivate students; identify people, places, things, events, and processes in the community that will enhance students' inquiry and learning; select materials, resources, and technology that will promote the acquisition and application of selected concepts, knowledge, and subject matter related skills; and ensure that students will be able to evaluate personal performance. Contains 32 references. (Author/DK)

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HUMANS & ENVIRONMENT  
LEARNING PROGRAM  
(HELP)

ENHANCING OPTIMUM LEARNING MOMENTS IN SOCIAL STUDIES INSTRUCTION

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CREATING GENERATIONS OF NATURE SENSITIVE/CULTURE LITERATE STUDENTS

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

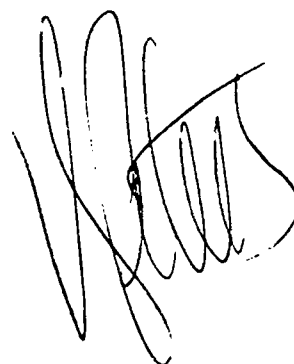
Dr. Richard Peters is Founder/Projects Director of GLOBAL HORIZONS: THE CENTER FOR APPLIED ECO/SOCIAL STUDIES.

Since 1971, Dr. Peters has been engaged in K-12 Environmental Education/Global Studies curriculum development.

Over the course of the past twenty-five years, Dr. Peters has written about ECO/SOCIAL STUDIES in professional periodicals and in a series of ERIC documents -- including STRATEGIES TO AFFECT STUDENT SENSORY AWARENESS OF THE ENVIRONMENT; HOW TO TAKE THE CLASSROOM OUT INTO THE ENVIRONMENT; OUR COMMON HOME: EARTH; THE GLOBAL ECOSYSTEM; and LEARNING TO LIVE IN THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY.

In 1994, Dr. Peters copyrighted an original manuscript entitled OPTIMUM LEARNING MOMENTS: KEYS TO EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS FROM CHILDHOOD THROUGH ADULTHOOD.

Presently, Dr. Peters is Assistant Professor of Education at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.



### OPTIMUM LEARNING MOMENTS (OLMs)

Learning is a process of knowledge and skills acquisition, application, reinforcement, and refinement that cannot be rushed. Not all 'students' learn the same thing(s) - in the same way(s) - at the same time - to the same degree of proficiency.

Each 'student' brings a PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE to assigned tasks. This perspective is a compilation of native abilities, acquired skills, personal interests, prior experiences, the home environment, exposure to diverse learning encounters, culture, attitudes-beliefs-values, and a track record of success related to the formal education process.

Learning is not a constant activity for an individual. At any time, for a variety of reasons, a 'student' will choose to mentally and physically participate in formal learning activities, and when to opt out. Each is selective about that which is received and that which is ignored. Each 'student' makes the critical decision to BUY INTO learning encounters or to RING UP a 'no sale'. This is the essence of learner empowerment.

There are but a few critically important times during a class period or a typical school day when individuals tend to focus - to inquire - to question - to learn - to apply concepts/knowledge/skills. These times (OPTIMUM LEARNING MOMENTS) are different for different individuals.

A review of today's literature and research will lead one to investigate the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983 and 1993); preferred learning styles (Dunn and Dunn, 1978); brain-based learning (Chamberlin and Chambers, 1991); and the characteristics of effective classroom teachers (Langlois and Zales, 1991). As a result of surveying available information in these fields - one will quickly realize that learning is not a simple process. Not all children and youths are able to learn equally well.

What are the ramifications of these theories, and OLMS, upon K-12 social studies instruction? How important is field-based instruction in the social studies curriculum? What are the most-effective ways for students to learn social studies-related knowledge and skills? What are the characteristics, conditions, and situations that enhance students' learning?

NOTE: LEARNING is defined herein as the acquisition (acceptance and internalization) and application (everyday use) of subject-specific content (facts and information pertaining to a discourse of knowledge) and skills.

STRATEGIES: PLANNING

Because OPTIMUM LEARNING MOMENTS are different for different students, the challenge facing social studies teachers (K-12) is to:

identify activities and experiences  
that will interest/motivate students;

identify people, places, things, events,  
and processes (in the community) that  
will enhance students' inquiry and  
learning;

select materials/resources and technology  
that will promote the acquisition and  
application of selected concepts/knowledge/  
subject matter-related skills;

ensure that students will be able to  
evaluate personal performance, and will  
readily perceive progress made toward  
goals attainment.

OPTIMUM LEARNING MOMENTS happen when students are:

provided a variety of learning encounters from which each can choose that SPECIAL encounter that fulfills a personal interest or need;

encouraged to learn about common concepts, facts, and information in a variety of ways;

encouraged to enhance native abilities, and to acquire subject-specific skills in a variety of ways;

allowed to apply preferred learning styles to clearly defined tasks;

to feel good about individual and collective efforts.

The place (LOCATION) and environment (CONTEXT) in which learning/inquiry takes place will effect:

teaching styles;

learning styles;

types of encounters (activities and experiences) provided for in the teaching/learning process;

the amount of time required to  
complete a task(s);

the materials/resources used to  
enhance concepts/knowledge/skills  
acquisition and application;

the authenticity of the encounter(s);

the mind-set of teacher(s)/student(s);

the degree to which acquired concepts/  
knowledge/skills are used to complete  
a task.

#### Learning Encounters Menu

- Realizing that each student is unique - that each has a preferred learning style (or combination of styles); utilizes combinations of multiple intelligences; and is motivated to participate in the learning process in different ways, social studies teachers can begin to think about designing a menu of learning encounters. Such a menu would provide an array of ways students can work at a common task -- and experience success.

#### Learning Enhancement Teams (LETs)

Social studies teachers (from the several grades) along with instructional support specialists, administrators, and contracted services personnel meet to design learning encounter menus that will accommodate a varied



student population. By designing learning encounter menus, LETs provide for Prescriptive Learning Plans (PLPs) for K-12 students. A student's PLP becomes part of his/her portfolio - and travels with him/her through the several grades.

Community resource people provide LET input - when designing field-based encounters for students. THUS, people, places, things, events, and processes become an integral part of authentic experiences, for students, within the context of the community lifespace environment.

#### Assessment

RELEVANCE is the key to successful learning and the measurement of individual student/group success. It must be remembered that students must be assessed the way(s) they learn! If the learning encounter is hands-on -- then measuring the degree of student success must use a hands-on mode. If a student learns by listening -- then the assessor must listen to what the student has to say through verbal communication.

Authentic assessment at field-based sites; in classrooms; at project worksites is based upon students DOING things. They explain; demonstrate; act out scenarios; share research information; express themselves in artistic manners; and carry out the functions of researching social scientists.

STRATEGIES: TEACHING

Each student is unique - each teacher is unique! What which may work for one social studies teacher (in the realm of pedagogy) may not suit the teaching style of another. Thus, each-and-every teacher must discover those methods and styles that work best (for him/her) based upon clearly stated goals and objectives.

REMEMBER: When designing daily lesson plans - include a series of clearly stated teacher objectives as well as student objectives. Sometimes, a single objective might serve the needs of teacher AND students - but usually, there is a need to write a set of objectives for each. FOR EXAMPLE:

TEACHER

STUDENT(S)

The teacher will:

The student will:

present a twenty minute  
lecture on the topic:  
POLLUTION IN THE ENVIRONMENT

- . air pollution
- . water pollution
- . noise pollution
- . sight pollution

use a POLLUTION video tape  
to elaborate upon the daily  
lecture.

use a map to show where  
depicted POLLUTION scenes  
are located.

takes notes in his/her  
class folder.

list the four types of  
POLLUTION discussed in  
the daily lecture.

discuss his/her impressions  
of POLLUTION scenes depicted  
in the video tape presentation.

identify POLLUTION scene  
locations.

Setting: Classroom

Teachers can lecture - while students take notes. They can use visuals to highlight the lecture, or visuals such as motion pictures, slides, and video tapes can explain themselves. Other visuals such as overhead transparencies, maps, globes, posters, art objects (etc) can be used to highlight/enrich lectures or to stimulate student interests.

Students can be placed in cooperative groups - for the purpose of creating situations in which students must express their ideas, listen to the points-of-view of other students, arrive at consensus, and participate in class activities. There may be times when small groups (up to 5 students) can achieve goals that individual students would find difficult to accomplish (within specific periods of time).

Technology (hardware and software) can be used to provide students diverse opportunities to inquire and learn - either individually or in small groups. Teachers should identify, and incorporate into the teaching process, those materials that supplement lectures, expand upon question/answer periods, introduce students to experiences/information previously not encountered, and expand opportunities for students to apply their personal abilities/interests/needs to the discovery process.

Community resources can be introduced into the classroom. Resource people can serve as guest speakers and demonstrators. Community artifacts (from natural/social environments) can

be shown to students - and explained. Community sites can be brought into the classroom via motion pictures, slides, or video tapes.

As with each new unit of study, the social studies teacher can design/introduce bulletin board displays, create learning centers, have students construct displays, and convert the classroom into a site or setting (such as a frontier trading post, sodbuster's cabin, a polling place).

The classroom can become a research laboratory - a place where students are 'free' to experiment with new/different information sources, to create a variety of media presentations, to think about and design strategies for change, etc.

#### Setting: Community

Students live in the community environment - and they should learn within that environment!

Social studies teachers MUST be familiar with the character and history of the community(ies) in which they live and teach.

People, places, things, events, and processes unique to the local community/region provide opportunities for students to relate their formal education to everyday living.

Schools cannot replicate the totality of the real world within the four walls of classrooms. The walls of classrooms must be expanded to incorporate aspects of the community within them.

Nature walks, culture walks, brief excursions away from the school, all-day field trips to distant places, and instruction at field-based sites are but a few of the learning opportunities that can be provided students within the context of the community lifespace environment.

REMEMBER: ALL students need to develop a 'repertoire of success' - that is, a positive attitude or frame-of-reference about formal learning. This 'repertoire' is founded on a track record of prior accomplishments and the development of a positive SELF concept.

When designing classroom and field-based encounters, the social studies teacher must consider students' chronological age (CA), mental age (MA), and social age (SA). RE: social age - are the students mature enough to control their behavior? to work cooperatively with the teacher and others? be responsible for their actions? be trusted by the teacher when out-of-sight?

One way to enhance social age (SA) development is to design encounters in which students must cooperate with fellows. As social beings, each student (regardless of chronological age) must define WHAT IT IS TO BE A HUMAN BEING - as an individual and as a member of social groups.

When designing classroom/field-based learning encounters, social studies teachers should consider four different teaching/learning schema.

DLEs: Directed Learning Environments.

The teacher is usually the center of attention - focusing on introducing students to new concepts/content knowledge/subject-specific skills. The teacher uses lecture, audiovisual materials, technology, modeling and demonstrations to focus students' attention. The teacher is usually more active than students in DLEs. Thus, the teacher should give careful consideration to classroom management/discipline strategies.

PEEs: Performance Enhancement Environments.

Once selected concepts/knowledge/skills have been acquired, students are provided opportunities to apply each in real life and real-to-life (simulated) situations. The teacher designs alternative 'routes' by which students (possessing different abilities and interests) can achieve stated goals and objectives. Students are usually more active than teachers in PEEs. The teacher serves as a facilitator of learning and a resource to student inquiry.

SEEs: Simulated Experience Environments.

In addition to concrete/direct experiences and exposure to people, places, things, events, and processes - students interact with phenomena through real-to-life (simulated) experiences. Computer software, films, filmstrips, slides, videotapes, board games, and role playing activities are incorporated into the teaching/learning process to affect perceptions, to enrich concepts/knowledge/skills acquisition, to expand metacognitive skills, and to promote action.

ILES: Inquiry-based Learning Environments.

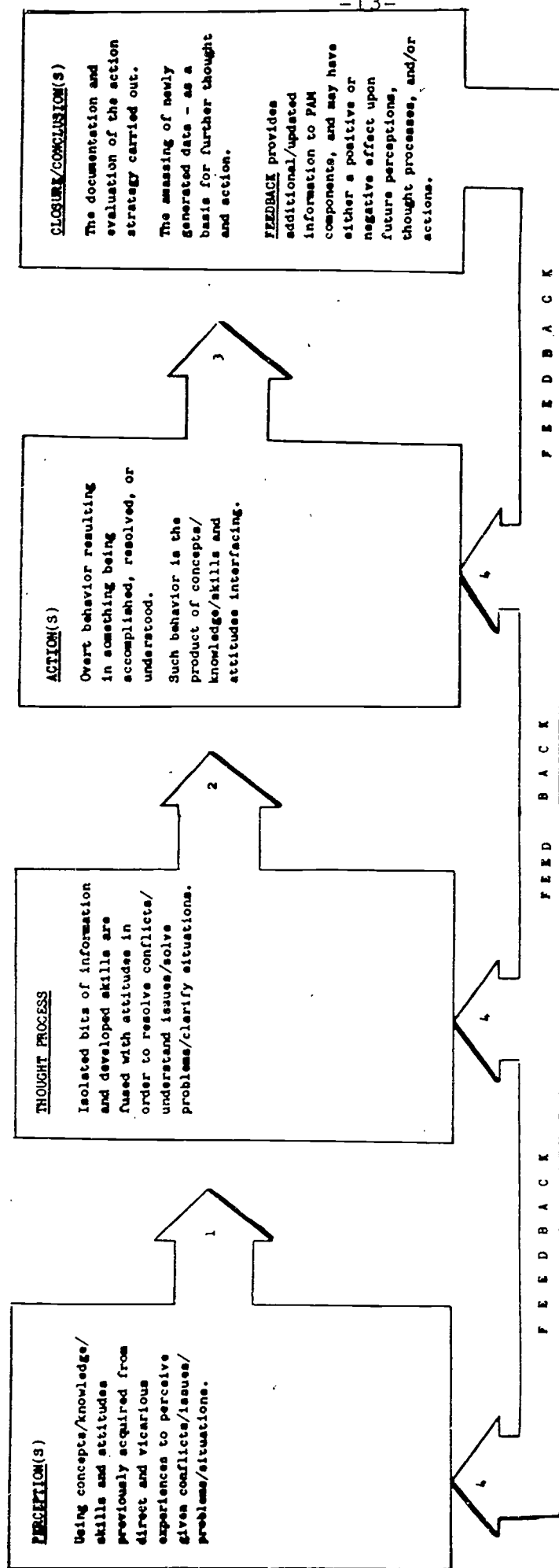
Students are encouraged to learn on their own. Teachers design encounters that will enable students to inquire - using trial and-error strategies. Focus is on intellectual skills development; critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making. The PROACTIVE ACTION MODEL (PAM) can be used by students to structure and promote intellectual skills development. Using PAM, students become inquiring social scientists.  
(SEE PAGE 13)

The PROACTIVE ACTION MODEL (PAM) provides a visual image of what the discovery process looks like. It transforms an abstract concept into concrete reality.

As social studies students move through the schema, they stop to notice 'things' around them that they were previously unaware existed. They also organize their impressions and understanding into a logical THOUGHT PROCESS; they think about alternative ways to DO something; they plan strategies for acting upon those thoughts; and they critically analyze that which has been undertaken and accomplished.

The PAM schema meets the criteria of OPTIMUM LEARNING MOMENTS construction/organization - both in the social studies classroom and at field-based sites in the community lifespace environment.

product



-13-

PAM is a modified 'scientific method' schema used to promote students' inquiry and holistic thinking - while enhancing intellectual skills development.



STRATEGIES: LEARNING

Using the teacher-designed learning encounters menu, students select those activities/experiences that best suit their individual personalities, needs, abilities, and intrinsic desire to participate in the inquiry/discovery process - at any given moment in time.

In addition to selecting those activities and experiences of personal interest, students can also choose the 'vehicles' by which they will achieve stated goals and objectives; namely, PEEs, SEEs, or ILEs. (SEE PAGES 11 and 12)

A Hypothetical. Social studies and science teachers have cooperatively designed a unit dealing with the interrelationships between MAN and NATURE. The unit is based upon the premise that MAN and NATURE are dependent upon each other for survival, and that they coexist within the context of 'cooperative living habitats'.

As the unit evolves, students are engaged in classroom and field-based encounters that promote inquiry/discovery and intellectual skills development. For example, students are:

introduced to the character and origins of selected natural environments (and related phenomena) that are nearby/close to home and distant/far-removed;

introduced to the character and origins of selected social (MAN-made) environments

(and related phenomena) that are nearby/close-to-home and distant/far-removed;

study processes that occur in selected natural/social settings that are nearby/close-to-home and distant/far-removed;

compare processes that occur in selected natural/social settings that are nearby/close-to-home with similar processes occurring in distant/far-removed settings;

study interactions between/among natural and social phenomena that are nearby/close-to-home and distant/far-removed;

study the impact that selected natural environments have/have had upon the existence/prosperity of social environments that are nearby/close-to-home and distant/far-removed;

study the impact that selected social environments/human groups have/have had upon the existence/prosperity of natural environments that are nearby/close-to-home and distant/far-removed;

Throughout this inquiry/discovery process, students are frequently asked to reflect upon the following questions: WHO AM I AS AN INDIVIDUAL? WHO AM I AS A MEMBER OF SOCIAL GROUPS? WHO AM I AS A HUMAN BEING INTERACTING WITH NATURE?

SAMPLE LEARNING ENCOUNTERS

CONCEPT	Sensing the Natural Environment
GOAL(S)	<p>To acquaint students with the diversity of natural sites in the community and region;</p> <p>to enable students to experience the character (phenomena) of natural sites - through the several senses;</p> <p>to acquaint students with natural landforms;</p> <p>to develop within students an awareness and understanding of the impact that humans have/have had upon natural sites and related phenomena/processes - in the community and region;</p> <p>to develop within students an awareness and understanding of the continuous interaction and interdependence between MAN and NATURE in the community and region.</p>
ACTIVITIES	<p>Walking tours of selected nature sites for the purpose of sensing surroundings.</p> <p>Field trips to distant nature sites for purposes of sensing surroundings, and to conduct field studies.</p> <p>Guest speakers in the classroom, and at field-based sites, discuss the origins, composition, phenomena, and processes of natural settings, e.g., flora, fauna, resources, landscape, and terrain.</p> <p>Students use graphic media devices (e.g., motion picture cameras, still photography cameras, video tape cameras) to collect data, and to record their impressions at natural sites. NOTE: Use of graphic media devices enable students to experiment with a new medium of creativity and self expression/communications.</p>

Students make journal entries, write essays, and/or create art work that reflect their sensing of nature.

Students investigate types/sources of pollution, and propose ways to solve existing situations/problems.

Guided tours of urban settings - thus enabling students to observe examples of land use planning.

Audiovisual presentations are used to introduce students to locations, phenomena, processes (natural/social) that are distant/far-removed.

Independent readings/research related to topics affecting the community/region.

Individual/small group studies and oral/visual reports and demonstrations.

Students create original bulletin board displays.

Students write letters-to-the-editor of local/area newspapers.

Students write letters to local/regional/nationally-elected public officials.

Students write items for a column that appears weekly in local/area newspapers.

Students write/produce a weekly fifteen minute WHAT'S NEWS! program for a local/area television station.

Students attend local/regional public meetings and report to the class.

Students interview local/area officials and personalities - recording comments on audio/video tape and/or film.

### COMMENTS

It should be remembered that social studies teachers can plan and execute flawlessly - but it is the student who will determine the degree of teaching/learning encounter success!

To motivate students - to want to participate in the teaching/learning process, teachers must pay close attention to the types of encounters and materials that will focus students' attention and efforts on assigned tasks.

Teaching/learning is a cooperative endeavor! Teachers cannot do it alone. It takes the efforts of students to make the process work.

Combining classroom and field-based encounters in the social studies curriculum will help to 1) make learning interesting to students, 2) involve them directly in the inquiry/discovery process, 3) allow them to apply native and acquired skills to the learning process, 4) enable them to experiment - and to learn from mistakes, and 5) permit them to work cooperatively with fellows - to solve problems, to find answers to perplexing questions, and to achieve success at assigned tasks.

At times, social studies teachers need to envision themselves as fellow students - learning about the natural and social worlds around them right along with the students. They need to model the behaviors and processes that they want to instill in students.

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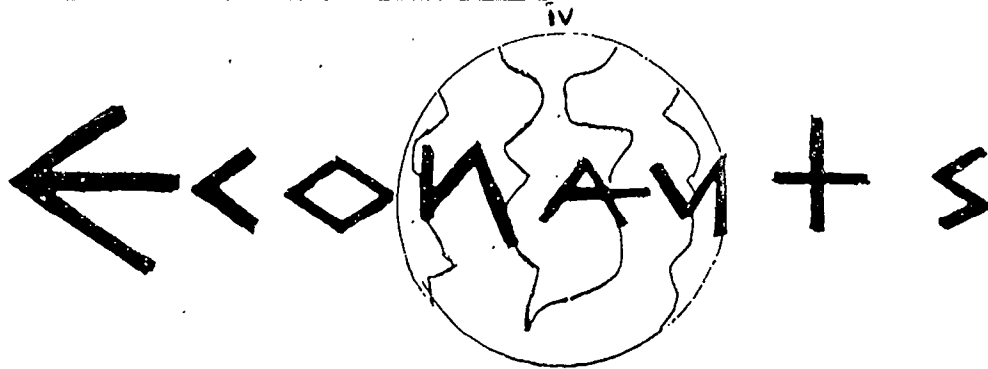
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Too often, in the past, MAN looked to the forests  
and viewed bounteous trees of gargantuan proportions:  
CUT THEM DOWN!

He next turned his attention to ...

the churning seas and discovered fishes  
galore: CATCH THEM ALL!

the blue skies and witnessed the migration  
of countless numbers of birds: SHOOT THEM  
DOWN!

nature's finite mineral resources: DIG THEM  
UP!

the rolling hills and majestic mountains:  
TEAR THEM DOWN!

the sparkling, rushing waters of mighty  
rivers: DAM THEM UP!

the kaleidoscopic hue of wild flowers aglow  
in the sunlight: PLOW THEM UNDER!

Wherever MAN looked he saw NATURE and had an insatiable  
urge to master it -- even to destroy it!

Because MAN and NATURE are inextricable entities sharing  
a common lifespace, they exist in a perpetual state of  
interlocking dependency.

Environmental constructionists are nature sensitive  
individuals who are aware of the natural world around  
them; informed about past and present conflicts, issues,  
problems, and situations related to natural environments;  
empathetic with the plight of nature -- locally, regionally,  
nationally, and internationally; understand the character  
of diverse natural environments both nearby/close to home  
and distant/far-removed; exhibit attitudes and opinions  
about ecology-related issues in contemporary life through  
proactive action; and perceive and understand relationships  
between humans and nature.

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